Water tests find no new problems

Cleanup efforts to be focused on four wells south of Azusa

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Final testing of wells in the San Gabriel Valley area confirms what water officials say has been believed for months: Contamination by a rocket fuel component is restricted mostly to some wells south of Azusa.

With testing completed, officials are focusing on finding a method to treat wells tainted by the chemical perchlorate, which can cause thyroid disorders.

"You can spend a million dollars to try and investigate the sources and not come up with any conclusive solution," said Hank Yacoub, chief of groundwater cleanup for the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board. "We have to focus now on a solution."

Testing completed last month showed that except for one well in Covina, perchlorate has not been detected at levels above state standards outside of the area south of Azusa, where it forced closure of four active wells.

The discovery of the chemical last summer in parts of Baldwin Park and Irwindale halted plans to construct a treatment plant for previously discovered industrial solvents that caused the area to be named a federal Superfund site.

The plans call for the treated water to be sold to help pay for the $40 million plant, something that cannot be accomplished if it contains perchlorate and is not potable.

"The cleanup in Baldwin Park is at stake," Yacoub said.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has said it believes Aerojet, which built solid rocket engines in Azusa after World War II, is a source of perchlorate contamination in a 27-square-mile area south of its plant.

The company is among 19 the EPA previously named as potentially responsible for the solvent contamination. The companies are conducting research on possible perchlorate treatment that has already reached the pilot stage.

The biological treatment method uses microorganisms to break down the bonds in the perchlorate and render it harmless.

A small pilot treatment facility in Sacramento County, where Aerojet has another plant and has acknowledged responsibility for perchlorate contamination, has removed the chemical to the point it does not turn up in tests.

"We are still collecting data . . . but so far it looks very positive and encouraging," said Don Vanderkar, an Aerojet environmental specialist. "We are getting non-detects for perchlorate at 20 gallons per minute."

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The company, along with several others named by the EPA for the solvent pollution, also has contributed $30,000 for a perchlorate treatment project led by the Main San Gabriel Basin Watermaster.

That project, approved late last year, would test whether an ion exchange treatment might work, a process similar to the devices used to soften home water but which must be tailored to treat the chemical.

"We need to find a solution and that is why we are working aggressively," said Carol Williams, executive director of the watermaster, which manages the 167-square-mile basin that stretches from La Verne to South Pasadena.

Results from the ion exchange might be available in about six months, she said.

The San Gabriel Basin Water

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WATER

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Quality Authority has been funding testing of a carbon filtration system, similar to that used on industrial solvents, at a test well in Baldwin Park.

Initial results have been promising, said Jim Goodrich, executive director of the authority, which is charged with facilitating the basin's cleanup.

"We are seeing that carbon will take the perchlorate out, but nobody knows why it works," he said. "We are still studying it."

Wayne Praskins, who is overseeing the Baldwin Park cleanup for the EPA, said it is likely that the construction of the plant, which was supposed to be operational in 1999, will be delayed for at least a year.

"We don't expect any dramatic breakthroughs in the near term," he said.

Testing of five wells completed in December by the watermaster wrapped up its basin testing program, which involved about 250 residential, industrial and agricultural wells, Williams said.

Three of the four wells shut down were operated by the small La Puente Valley County Water District, while a fourth was operated by the San Gabriel Valley Water Co. All were within the main body of contamination.

Nearly all of the other wells that tested positive, about 30 in all, were below a state standard of 18 parts per billion.

Yacoub said that except for perchlorate found in Covina-area groundwater, he believes that migration over decades in the heavily pumped basin might account for the contamination outside the main body south of Azusa.

Southern California Water Co. plans its own studies to determine how three of company wells were found to contain the chemical, even if in only trace amounts.

"Quite frankly we don't have an answer and that is why we are going to take a review to try and find out where it might come from," said Jim Gallagher, a company vice president.

The company has started a public service campaign to assure its 37,500 area customers of water quality, noting that 45 of its basin wells are free of perchlorate while the three contaminated ones are well below state standards.